

## **Savage Design Studio Seattle, Washington**



Pauline Savage spends her days creating things of beauty. While doing so she is surrounded – and perhaps inspired - by frescoes of iris, pears, butterflies, as well as dozens of flowers, fruits, and insects. Savage creates old world botanical frescoes in her Seattle studio – Savage Design Studio - and sells them through wholesalers.

Fresco painting is the art of painting on fresh moist plaster with earth colors dissolved in water. Frescoes were especially popular during the Italian Renaissance, the wealthy vying to decorate their homes with them

Savage, who has training in the fine arts, has always been fascinated by scientific illustrations. She loves to read about early explorers and naturalists who, she said, “saw the importance of carefully observing the natural world around them and recording what they found.” Savage earned a Bachelor of Visual Arts from the University of Kansas, and a B.S. in Fine Arts and an M.A. in Ceramics and Painting from the University of Fort Hays State in Kansas.

Her studio is filled with botanical books that she uses for her research. She remains true to the drawings – even recording volume numbers or pages.

Before opening Savage Design Studio in 2001, Savage had been painting the fresco line for five years for an artist who ran the business from his home. When he decided to discontinue that part of the business, Savage asked him to sell the business to her. After thinking about it overnight, he said “yes.” Neither knew how to begin.

Savage asked a long-time friend, Ann Davis, if she would join this new venture. “I admire Ann’s keen, analytical mind,” said Savage. “I knew that if Ann said I shouldn’t take over this business, then I wouldn’t do it.”

Davis meticulously analyzed the business records. She concluded there was no business to buy. “It made better business sense to buy the rights to the fresco line. This way we would have the product, the copyright, and the customer list, but not the debt or ‘skeletons’ from the old business,” said Davis.

In August 2001 Savage and Davis called Michael Franz, a counselor with the Small Business Development Center (SBDC). SBDC is partly funded by the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA). SBDCs are located throughout Washington. SBDC counselors are experienced business owners and managers who provide one-on-one, confidential management and technical business assistance – at no cost. Savage turned to the SBA for help because she had used SBA services before in two small businesses she started in Kansas City.

“The day we met Michael Franz was our lucky day,” Davis said. “He believes in us, and he continues to be there for us. Sometimes he is brutally honest, for example when he told us that no bank would lend us money with the proposal we were presenting. He was right.” Franz holds an MBA in operations research and a BSE degree in engineering from the University of Michigan. He has more than 30 years of career experience in the fields of engineering and business management.

In December 2001 things weren’t looking good for Savage Design Studio. The company lacked financing and the person from whom they were trying to buy the business had changed his mind about significant aspects of the deal. “The situation was wobbly, at best,” recalls Savage.

Davis remembers Franz giving them homework and telling them what lenders would look for. “We rehearsed with Michael how the loan interview would go. When I went to the bank I anticipated questions and kept talking. I think the banker gave me the loan to shut me up.” Savage ended up with a small business loan from Citizens Bank in Kansas.

The sales and distribution transition from the previous owner to Savage Design Studio was also shaky. A letter introducing Savage as the new owner was never sent. Some clients did not realize that Savage had been drawing and painting the frescoes for the past five years.



In January 2002 the business license was in place and things were looking up. In June Savage Design had a web site, [www.savagedesignstudio.com](http://www.savagedesignstudio.com) and brochures, which they mailed to former customers. Business increased dramatically, and Savage and Davis knew they had to do something to handle it.

Savage and Davis decided to hire two additional part-time employees. (Davis works part-time for Savage Design Studio, and part-time for another business.) Rather than take out a help-wanted ad, they contacted the pre-apprentice carpentry program at Seattle Vocational Technical Institute.

They now employ two students from the program to build the wooden framework for the frescoes. Savage Design Studio's flexible hours, good pay, location on a bus line, and proximity to the college works well for the students. When the two students finish their apprenticeships, two more students will assume their positions at Savage Design.

A sense of community is extremely important to Savage and Davis. Their business neighbors (Cherry Productions) designed their web site and brochure, and helped them build their computer from components. Cherry Productions even shared heat during the winter when the gas lines to the Savage Design Studio weren't connected.

What advice do they have for someone wanting to start a business? Davis advises, "It helps to be enthusiastic and like people, but business is business. It's more than just following your heart." Savage, who did almost six months of research before starting Savage Design Studio, says, "Proceed methodically and identify risks to minimize them." She adds, "I couldn't have done it without Ann and Michael."

Future plans? Savage says, "The company develops before our eyes. We have direction, but the company has a shape of its own. This was true of my other start-up businesses. It's like a puzzle . . . it shifts to meet spaces, which also shift."